

## MEDICAL SOCIETIES RALLY FOR CERVICAL CANCER ELIMINATION

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The Philippine Foundation for Vaccination (PFV) hosted a media forum, uniting various sectors to accelerate cervical cancer elimination efforts amid a rising incidence of 15 cases per 100,000 women, aiming to make this a national health priority.

In collaboration with various medical societies, the Department of Health (DOH), and the Department of Education (DepEd), the “Isang Boses Laban Sa Cervical Cancer” initiative emphasized their collective commitment to advancing HPV vaccination, screening, and treatment to eliminate cervical cancer by 2064.

PFV president Dr. Rose Capeding compared the event to a prominent pink chair on stage during the opening remarks, symbolizing that while cervical cancer patients and survivors may not be physically present, the insights and commitments made are dedicated to them.

“The path to eliminating cervical cancer is not just a medical challenge but a moral responsibility to owe. We owe every Filipina the right to empowerment, education and protection for her future. [This is] why we unite our voices today to protect our future with action,” added Dr. Martha Aquino, the vice president of the Philippine Infectious Diseases Society for Obstetrics and Gynecology (PIDSOG). This event marks a significant advancement for the medical field and all Filipinas, as the Philippines has the lowest HPV vaccine coverage among low- to middle-income countries, with only 23 percent of the target female population receiving the first dose and just five percent completing the final dose, according to a 2022 study in *Frontiers in Medicine*.

“This event is about preserving the bond of families, allowing women to thrive and continue to live in society. [...] We cannot let this continue [cervical cancer] to our mother, sister, aunt, cousin and friend. Let us honor those we lost by protecting those we love,” Dr. Margarita Luisa Alfonso said.

### HPV vaccination

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the leading cause of cervical cancer, claiming 12 Filipinas' lives daily, yet nearly all cases are preventable through vaccination, which significantly reduces infection risk and offers a critical opportunity to save thousands from cervical cancer and related diseases.

In response to this public health challenge, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched the Global Strategy to Accelerate the Elimination of Cervical Cancer in 2020, aiming for 90 percent of girls fully vaccinated with the HPV vaccine by age 15, 70 percent of women screened by ages 35 and 45, and 90 percent of women with cervical disease receiving appropriate treatment by 2030.

The Philippines faces significant challenges in cervical cancer prevention, with only 33 percent HPV vaccine coverage for girls and a screening rate of less than one percent for women. This circumstance highlights the urgent need for stronger initiatives to improve vaccination and screening access; if fully implemented, these efforts could eliminate cervical cancer by 2064, potentially preventing 970,000 deaths.

This is why the forum emphasized integrating the ninevalent HPV vaccine into the national immunization program. This vaccine offers broader protection against emerging high-risk HPV types, including 31, 45, 52 and 58, which have become more prevalent in the Philippines. Already available in private healthcare since 2017 and pre-qualified by the WHO, the nine-valent vaccine is essential to the country's cervical cancer prevention strategy.

“Vaccines are important tools for our children's protection. Vaccines are investments for our children's future. We have a weapon of mass protection with HPV vaccines,” DoH Medical Officer IV Dr. Carmina Paz Vera said, noting that HPV vaccines are free for girls aged nine to 14 at health centers nationwide.

## Beyond Statistics

Eden Lucero, a grandmother and cervical cancer survivor, shared her experience battling the disease, emphasizing that the burden extends beyond statistics. In a pre-recorded video, she highlighted the importance of sharing her story to humanize the issue and raise awareness.

“Outgoing ako na tao. Mahilig ako pumunta sa mall, mag bakasyon kasama ng mga anak ko at kaibigan, tumulong sa city jail, orphanage, home-aged at tsaka sumama rin ako sa medical missions. Pero simula nung nagka-cancer ako, maraming nagbago sa buhay ko — naka-stay na lang ako sa bahay ko, ‘di na ko nakakasama sa mga dating nagagawa ko sa labas (I’m an outgoing person. I love going to the mall, going on vacations with my kids and friends, helping at the city jail, orphanages and homes for the aged, and I also participate in medical missions. But ever since I was diagnosed with cancer, a lot has changed in my life — I mostly just stay at home now, and I can’t join in the activities I used to do outside),” Eden recalled.

This change affected her not only physically but also emotionally and mentally, leading to a diagnosis of anxiety and depression, according to her psychiatrist.

Like the once outgoing Eden, Cancer Warriors chief executive officer Carmen Auste shared her journey from being a victim of cancer to becoming a victor who advocates for a cervical cancerfree future for all Filipinas.

She highlighted how her difficult experiences motivated her to champion causes that alleviate the impact of cancer and HPV in the country.

“Ang HPV ay nakakasira ng buhay, love life at mental health, kaya ko ‘to nilalaban para maeliminate natin ‘to (HPV destroys lives, love lives, and mental health, which is why I’m fighting this so we can eliminate it,” she said, underscoring that all women or persons with a cervix are at risk for the disease.

## Fighting stigma

Quezon City councilor Charm Ferrer, a cervical cancer survivor and public health advocate, understands the urgency of combatting this deadly disease, leading her efforts to pass a groundbreaking bill aimed at cervical cancer elimination.

Last month, she launched a vaccination roadshow in District 1 of Quezon City, a five-week initiative running every Tuesday from 9 July to 6 August, designed to combat HPV.

As the first program of its kind among local governments in the Philippines, this mobile roadshow brings essential immunization services directly to the community. By making vaccines accessible to young girls aged nine to 14, the initiative — supported by the Quezon City government, Quezon City Health Office and barangay captains — highlights the critical role of preventive healthcare in reducing cervical cancer incidence.

“Last 9 July, we conducted mass vaccination... 37 barangays [in QC] sabay-sabay kaming kumuha ng mga bata para sabay-sabay silang bakunahan (We all took the children together so they could get vaccinated at the same time),” the QC councilor shared. “Vaccination is our first step.

Wala masyado (Not much) advocates for cervical cancer because there is stigma and bullying. We filed a local bill so it can advance nationally,” she added.